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HENRY BERNSTEIN

**Class dynamics of agrarian change:
writing a 'little book on a big idea'**

Firstly, I want to record my appreciation of the Mattersburg Circle and offer congratulations on the 25th anniversary of publication of the *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*. As a modest contribution to this special event, I provide a brief reflection on writing the first draft for a new series of 'little books on big ideas' concerning agrarian change. The series is a typically creative invention of Saturnino M. Borrás Jr., who is Canada Research Chair in the International Development Studies Programme at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he has established a Centre for Alternative Studies in Agrarian Change. The rationale of the series is to provide ideas and debates in a form that is accessible to activists in social movements and NGOs that deal with land and agrarian issues, as well as to university students.

The first two titles of the series are Ben Cousins' *Property, Power and Poverty: Land Questions in Africa* and mine, provisionally titled *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*. The prospect of writing the book was both exciting and daunting, maybe two sides of the same coin. It was exciting because it gave the opportunity, and challenge, of writing for a far wider audience than I usually reach. The series will appear in Chinese, Portuguese and Spanish translations with promising possibilities of editions in additional languages. It was daunting for several reasons, concerning both the subject matter and the intended audience.

On the question of the subject matter: how to select from and distill more than three decades of working in this area? The question forced me to recognize how much my work was shaped by a series of specific debates within materialist political economy (Marxism), not least at my own institution, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of

London, and in the pages of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* from 1973–2000 and the *Journal of Agrarian Change* since 2001, both based at SOAS. Agrarian change – from debates of the ‘classic’ transition from feudalism in Europe, to the impact of colonialism on Latin America, Asia and Africa, to the formation and mutations of a global food economy in the period of industrial capitalism and then globalization – is not only contested within Marxism, of course, but also between Marxism and various currents of populism.

Moreover, investigation and public debate of pressing issues of farming and food, agriculture and environment in today’s neoliberal globalization, are driven ideologically and politically much more by populism than Marxism, as a current wave of academic, quasi-academic and popular publications on such themes shows. And many of the prospective audience for the book are likely to be attracted by the undoubted oppositional vitality of current populist positions on agribusiness, ecology, and the like.

On audience: how to write for activists unfamiliar with modes of discourse common in academic exchange, and who have to be *persuaded* of the relevance to their analyses, struggles and practices of the ideas I want to present? At least I had the benefit of an ‘apprenticeship’ in writing for a wider readership at Britain’s excellent Open University, in a course team that produced several widely used textbooks. I was also able to adapt some of this previously written material for the current book.

In the end, I decided to write a primarily *theoretical* text, because of my belief that its audience is unlikely to know much, or any, materialist political economy and is capable of benefitting from an accessible introduction to it. Readers would then be able to test it for themselves, and to study it further if convinced of its utility. I tried to achieve this in several ways, explained after listing the chapters of the first draft (following many preliminary drafts):

- 1 Introduction: the political economy of agrarian change
- 2 Production and reproduction: key concepts
- 3 Capitalism: origins and spread
- 4 Colonialism and primitive accumulation
- 5 From farming to agriculture
- 6 Neoliberal globalization and world agriculture
- 7 Does capitalist agriculture need capitalist farmers?
- 8 Who are the farmers?
- 9 Complexities of class.

Firstly, it was necessary to introduce some key theoretical concepts (chapter 2 and a glossary of terms). Secondly, I illustrate the applications of these concepts in a historical framework, starting with chapter 3 on the ‘original’ and subsequent transitions to capitalism, and chapter 4 on colonialism. Chapter 5 partly deviates from the chronological approach, to emphasize how ‘agriculture’ in modern capitalism becomes distinct from, and subsumes, farming in both economic terms and as an object of politics and policy. This chapter covers the period from the 1870s to the 1970s, encompassing the formation of international divisions of labour, the rise and fall of international food regimes, and the period of ‘developmentalism’ in the South. Chapter 6 resumes the chronological narrative by outlining the period since the 1970s, including revisiting the question of the (final?) demise of the ‘peasantry’.

The last three chapters present and explain further theoretical issues, chapter 7 concerns the dynamics of capitalist agriculture and notions of ‘non-capitalist’ farming it is said to subsume, including ‘resistance’ to commodification by ‘small-scale’ farmers. Chapter 8 suggests why ‘small-scale’ or ‘peasant’ farming within capitalism should be seen as petty commodity production, and hence subject to pervasive, if uneven, patterns of class differentiation that caution against current populist notions of a unitary ‘people of the land’. A particular emphasis here is on labour and what I term ‘classes of labour’. The final chapter, chapter 9, presents complexities of class, in both its economic sociology and political sociology, by exploring the idea (following Balibar) that class relations are universal but not exclusive determinants of social practices in capitalism.

In effect, I cast the net very wide in order to show the logic of materialist political economy across the times and places of capitalism, with all their variations, in order to enable readers to recognize and ‘locate’ a materialist approach, the questions it asks, and the kinds of answers it provides. I had to find a method of exposition to do this, including warning about the highly schematic historical observations it entails, while also enlivening the text with apt examples as much as possible. At several points where it is useful, I explain briefly some of the disagreements within and between Marxism and populism, without attempting to explore them in depth, which would use too much of my ration of 40,000 words.

Now the manuscript is with a range of readers. I await their comments and suggestions with both interest and anxiety, as I will the responses of its audience(s) after the book is published in 2010.